

Affect



Meaning

art, capitalism and
affective responsibility

Performance artists choose the body as their main affective transmitter. Through presence in certain nervous system states, gaze, vocal prosody and deliberate gestures, they practise in legacies of community members in cultures across the globe who wield affective capacities: shamans, healers, witches, preachers, rockstars, drag queens, strippers and hypnotic public orators of many kinds.

Historically, embodied affect has also been interwoven with dramatic lighting, glamorous costume, and delivered in tandem with cultural signs and symbols in narrative context. It was also transmitted in venues that awed with their grand splendour, scale and cultural significance: the velvet and gold theatre, the ornate cathedral, the floodlit stadium, the sparkling night club, the natural amphitheatre nestled in the rock formation and couched in the sounds of waterfalls. These venues conjured an altered state, a sense of the more-than-human (God, spirit, mystical, universal, creative/libidinal energies) which could be channelled by a skilled performance-maker. All of this amplifies the meaning that the performer delivers. It does so with affects that communicate, *"Look at me. Look at what I'm saying. Look at me take up this space. I'm important. Pay attention. Come closer, or stand back; take it all in"*. In these ways, affects can lower one's boundaries and open up new subjective possibilities as meanings are absorbed without the guardrails of our habitual protections. Even the shimmering watercolours embellishing this zine emphasise the words it contains.

Affects can be a form of power. As sensing beings, we our bodyminds value and are drawn to things that transmit certain affects, and implicitly assign importance to them. However, not everybody wields such power responsibly. Nato Thompson has described the theatrical and occult choreography of Nazi rallies, which grew exponentially with the party. “An Aryan nation-style rock opera on par with Woodstock, the Olympics and an Iron Maiden concert”, they utilised anti-aircraft searchlights to produce what they called the “cathedral of light”, which would shoot 130 spotlights directly into the sky at the penultimate moment of oration.¹ It was a spell, which imbued the orator with implicit power through the senses, and would have felt wondrous to the receiver. But, they were just lights; no inherent meaning. Lights have no actual bearing on how powerful somebody is, nor how true or necessary or mystical their message is. Taken alone, they indicate someone’s affective conjuring skills, and the capital or resources to pull off the event. Nevertheless, affects also don’t discern: they were wielded in service of propaganda.

Similarly, the predatory guru can hype a potential follower into a cataclysmic release through affects carried in rhythm, vibrational sound, incense, chanting, breathing, body postures, hugs and eye contact. All the while they declare: “see that sensation? That is not just a nervous system state. That is an experience of the divine. That is evidence of the power I have. That is because *I know you, I know what you need, because I have access to planes of knowledge you can’t yet comprehend.*” It feels to the receiver like love, benevolence,

truth, transformation. It is a trust-and-authority conjuring spell which opens up the follower to exploitation.

Affects seem to have a strange and fraught relationship with their contexts. Affects are an intensity, and we seem to implicitly equate intensity with things like truth, authenticity, urgency, love, transformation or simply that liminal zone of *something important is happening and something is about to change*. This is a useful tool if you actually do want something to change for the better- it carries the potential for the affect to translate into action. Like the audience believing what you say to a greater extent and with a greater sense of urgency and importance, and thus following through on your pleas to donate funds or tell others about the cause. Some of the most profound experiences also occur when the affects match up with the context: the love is genuinely returned, a spiritual experience is changing your outlook, somebody is speaking an urgent truth to power which hasn't paid attention until the right affect could penetrate. But, affects are just potential for these things to occur. I think they can be a tool, and no tool is automatically innocent.

As my last event before Brisbane's first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, I attended a day-long workshop with Emma Maye Gibson/Betty Grumble. Our obscene beauty queen who glamours the queer scene with tantric absurdities led us through a day of affective theatre practices. These included maintaining eye contact whilst slowly mirroring another's movements, accessing automatic pre-conscious response

to shouted stimulus and actions of our co-performers, the opportunity to run as fast as you can to the point of danger, taking a turn to stand in a circle of the other members to experience “seeing and being seen” before delivering a line of dialogue with gravity. At the conclusion, my affect receivers were activated and wide open. Beaming, buzzing, connected, spongy, extroverted, excited about encounters with the other. I could feel a thick potential for all manner of things to happen, and for my ability to transform and respond as a situation might demand. I was altered. But, I remember the end of the workshop potently. She said, “we have done a lot of very powerful opening practice today, so it is very important that we zip up our energy portals before we go back outside.” An acknowledgement that being open is a space of potential transformation *and* of vulnerability. That not all transformation is necessarily positive, that not every scenario has your wellbeing in mind. It was a gesture of affective responsibility I had not encountered before and not encountered since.

The affective, immersive experience has also appeared and grown as an aesthetic category in contemporary art. An exhibition model which draws perpetual crowds, it is a place where experiments in pure affect can be maximally distilled. A legacy of modernism’s arc of increasing abstraction and non-figurative exploration of singular mediums, there

has been a progressive intensification of affect over the representational, with all the orienting signifiers it used to contain. Couched in the ideology of artistic autonomy, we've seen "the release of autonomous affects that are inseparable from [their] direct action on the nervous system".² This has been broadly celebrated as an accomplishment, a kind of objectivity, the pursuit of aesthetic facts, "liberated" from dependance on context. However, Gilles Deleuze has famously described this as constituting a kind of violence: unmediated affect invading the body without any/as much meaning-making orientation to soften the blow.

A number of theorists are also coming to recognise that the quality of everyday existence has been affectively eroded as part of capitalism's method, where the disruption of community means the fundamental, erotic pleasures of collectivity and belonging are ever-less available. Captured by Berardi as the "loss of *eros* in everyday life",³ the semiotic environment becomes flattened, abstracted, simulated, pornographied. We invest further in work and consumption, where these qualities are promised but rarely experienced in fullness. All of this further entrenching the embodied sense of precarity that lacks any traceable source.

Josephine Berry thus aligns this artistic trend of distilled affect with a "generic strategy" of contemporary capitalism.⁴

She remarks how, especially in public art commissioning, affect is coming to eclipse signifiers altogether. In Meanjin, this is expressed in how we've clad our state-run gallery in a James Turrell light installation. Unveiled to excited

media, *Night Life* (2018) renders the outside of the gallery in flat, shifting gradients of pure colour at grand scale. It complements another trend in our city: that of cladding buildings such as the casino in garish coloured spotlights, and placing neon purple cubes beneath the iron lion sculptures in the city square.

Amongst the alternative crowds, this garishness is acknowledged as part of Brisbane's *dag*. In your face, overdoing everything, no space for nuance, trying very hard to be modern but always *just* missing the mark. If it wasn't for the sheer scale, the sheen of perfection, and the placement of the Turrell directly on GOMA, one might not realise that one is by a world-renowned contemporary artist and others by local designers contracted by the casino or Council. However, not only is the Turrell just *full on*, I recognise in it Bernstein's phrase (borrowed by Berry) that it is 'bordering on the ghostly'; excised from it "the orientational significance of the sensory encounter, sensory experience as constitutive of conviction and connection to the world".⁵ In its size, hypnotic overwhelm and placement in public space I am forced into an encounter. How do I respond? Do I submit or numb?

The Turrell, along with light festivals such as Vivid Sydney, bring glaring, colourful lights to the city centre. Key aesthetic 'hooks' traditionally utilised by the carnival, the theme park, the trade fair, the festival, the mall and the casino have made their way into the cultural precinct. They drive "a profound theatricalisation of space", investing in

it “oneiric, otherworldly qualities”.⁶ Perfectly situated for extra-amplification by the powerful affects of our “iconic”

Brisbane river, it’s a sensuous glamour which beckons us, and functions to render the city strange. A slight dislocated, disoriented vibe in which we are more affectively vulnerable.

As the carnivals and casinos understand, this is a fabulous strategy for creating a liminality that draws people to your space, and has them consume during their stay. In an altered state, people will stay longer and, crucially, spend more money. I wonder whether the commissioners who named Night Life were nodding to commercialism intentionally.

The convenience of the strategy is also not lost on me. How artists and curators of profile along with urban planners and political decision makers have found a way to maximise aesthetic impact while circumventing the inherent risk and responsibility of commissioning something capable of initiating any kind of public discord, controversy or discussion in the community they serve and represent. In doing so, they have commissioned something generic, devoid of meaning and in no way relational or emplaced. *It means nothing.*

However, context remains, despite the efforts of artistic autonomy to deny it. What meanings arise when it isn’t even pseudo-isolated in a gallery space, but in the commons of our cultural precinct? I realise now that the practice of installing large-scale, abstract public works of pure affect by world-renowned contemporary artists is not intended as a public benevolence. Nor are they simply a profitable tourism

draw. They are a flex: an aesthetic communication of “look at our city in all its glamour and cultural contemporaneity... *invest in us*”. Thus, “the mortification of sensuous life finds its complement by commodification of the sensuous by the culture industry”.⁷ At risk of dramatics, I can’t un-see the work as a symbol of exploitation in the contemporary metropolis.

The negotiation of consent to being affectively shocked, awed and overwhelmed is complicated. We love and are drawn to affective experiences of all kinds, and willing submit themselves to them wherever we attend a rave or a horror film. Sometimes, genuinely positive transformation occurs as a result of our willing vulnerability to be affected. Vulnerability is a necessary condition for empathy, sensitivity and change. Affects also don’t need to be solely “positive” or comfortable to support collective wellbeing and justice. Occasionally, being affectively jolted can be productive and necessary for exposing a violation or hypocrisy. Being exposed to challenging things and pushed a little past our limits can also assist us to define our boundaries and ethics in more detail and nuance. As Claire Bishop describes, the idea that no one should insert themselves into another’s experience to create discomfort for fear of paternalism is generally too moralistic and lacks pragmatism.⁸ This is a big part of what artists do, especially when working in the commons; an important democratic freedom.

Thus, I don't suggest that things which push strongly to affect-driven response should not exist. Affects are inescapable. My friend Mary, a Buddhist psychotherapist, reminds me that we can't control how our environments affect our nervous system, but we do have some power to have some awareness and some mindfulness about our internal reactions to them. This isn't insignificant; it matters; there's some freedom available to us here (as she tells me, in Buddhist psychology, the only *true* freedom). I find some comfort in this way of thinking. I also think that some kind of 'affective literacy' informed by such principles might help us to resist affective coercion in the semiotic environment.

Nevertheless, I can't ignore how affective disorientation, disruption and overwhelm is also increasingly a tool for exploitation. As our bodyminds become commodified and artistic methods are appropriated by the system, I want artists to take this context into account. Berry explains that, in affective intensities, "we are unavoidably drawn into a network of "violent" sensations which trigger our reciprocity, whether we like it or not ... [where] the viewer is physically activated, made susceptible and by extension responsible".⁹

We are *already* responsiblised at the point of impact and here is the injustice. We are forced into a constant flow of implicit little labours as we self-manage and self-regulate our internal experience as we are exposed to increasing environmental intensities.

Affective responsabilisation is noticeable everywhere, though oftentimes denied and disguised. I notice how

the rationale for Turrell's Night Life states that the artist "*invites us into a realm of deep perception, asking us to question how our senses respond to light*". I return with the question - installed in the commons, where, precisely, is the invitation? Is it not more an insertion? How would I turn down this invitation? I'd like to ask for more. In an environment with autonomous affects constantly skimming energy off commodified nervous systems, I want public art that grounds my frazzled and whiplashed subjectivity with meaning, orientation and care. I want public art that takes responsibility.

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1 Thompson, N. (2017). *Culture as Weapon: The Art of Influence in Everyday Life*. Melville House Publishing. p. 49

2 Berry, J. (2019). *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry*. Sternberg Press. p. 90, quoting Gilles Deleuze's description of a Francis Bacon painting.

3 Berardi, F. "Bifo." (2009). *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (F. Cadel & G. Mecchia, Trans.). Semiotext(e). p. 80

4 Berry, J. (2019). p. 91

5 Ibid. p. 115

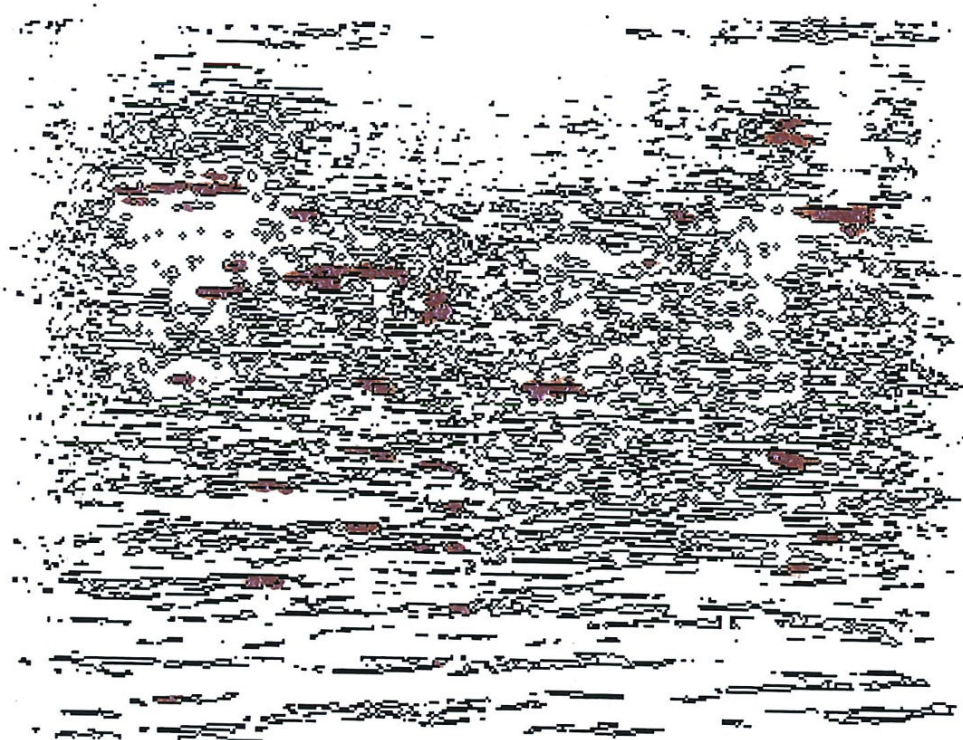
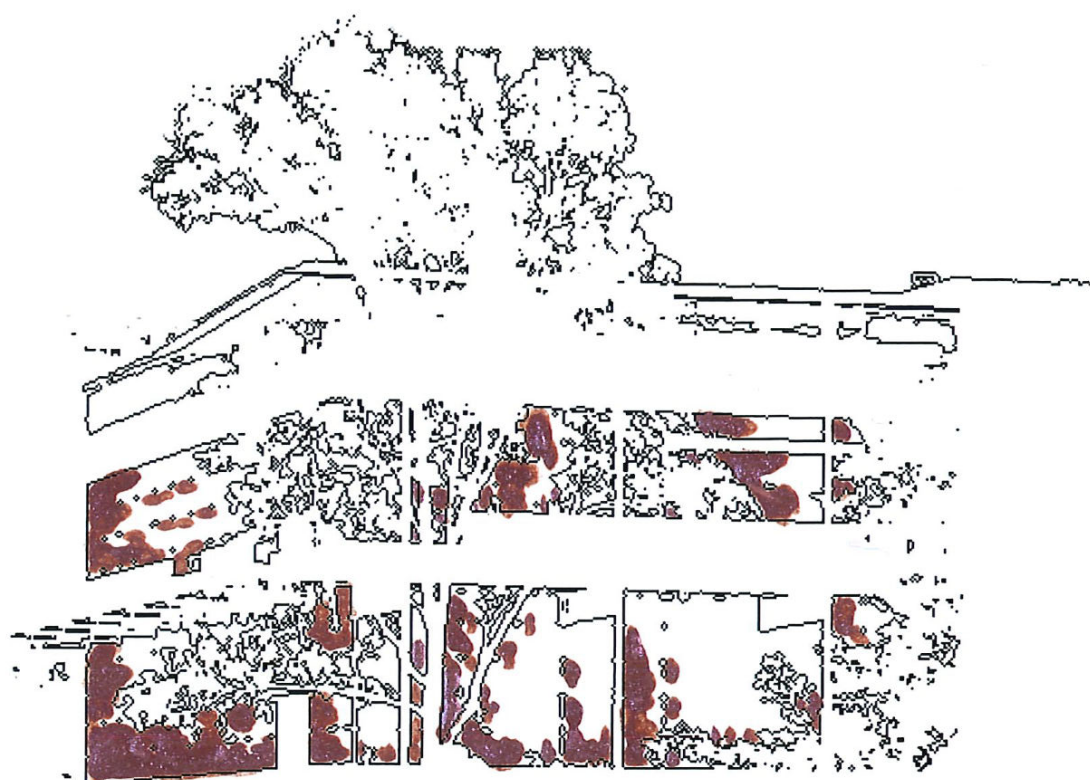
6 Edensor, T. (2017). *Festivals of Illumination: Painting and Playing with Light*. In *From Light to Dark: Daylight, Illumination, and Gloom* (pp. 109–138). p. 110

7 Berry, J. (2019). p. 92-93

8 Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. London : Verso, 2012. p. 238

9 Berry, J. (2019). p. 133

10 Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, 2018, emphasis my own



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